

Like an afternoon tent revival, people crowded onto a small Broomes Island beach to hear the teachings and preachings at what some would call the church of Bernie Fowler.

Fowler's annual Patuxent River wade-in, which unscientifically documents the river's clarity by measuring the distance Fowler is able to walk into the river and still see his white tennis shoes, left an uneasy feeling as the depth once again measured 27 inches, the same as last year.

With the devotion and dedication of the best preachers, former state senator Fowler talked about the need to protect the river, calling out specifically to the dozen or more politicians and office seekers as well as the younger crowd in attendance.

Last year he announced that he would again sue the state and/or federal government for not taking strong enough steps to clean up its rivers and the Chesapeake Bay if pollution is not slowed. He said a team of lawyers with the Chesapeake Bay Foundation is looking "to see if there's anything that they can hang their hat on it terms of legal recourse."

Among the possibilities is a lapse by the Environmental Protection Agency in enforcing nitrogen and phosphorus discharge caps for sewage treatment plants. Fowler said some scientific data suggests the river could come back within a year if the right nitrogen and phosphorus levels are obtained.

Fowler is also working to stem pollution from power plants (as much as 30 percent of the emissions settle into the Chesapeake Bay watershed) and runoff from urban and agricultural areas.

"We're pulling out all the stops and certainly moving ahead at a good pace," he said.

He lobbied for a bill in the last general assembly session that would have made the Patuxent an experiment for cleaning up rivers, a bill that was ultimately so watered down it was deemed useless. State politicians pledged to introduce a new, more effective bill next session.

"If that works we're going to be very happy with that. If it doesn't we're going to move ahead with legal aspects," Fowler said.

Darcy Whelan, 12, of Huntingtown created a history project last school year about Fowler and the wade-in. She nervously spoke at the event, outlining her personal reflections on the river and its seemingly eminent demise.

During her research for her Plum Point Middle School history project, she discovered how polluted the river has become over the last two to three decades and, "immediately wondered why so little was being done about it."

Since her project, which was on display at the event, Whelan's parents bought a house "seconds away" from the wade-in. "It's really sad because it's got this great view but then you go down to the pier and look down and see brown water," she said.

"It's not just sad and frustrating, it's dangerous ... We need to clean this river and we need to do it now," Whelan said.

Presley Collinson, 11, of Chesapeake Beach recalled a picture of a waterman that hung on the wall of her grandparents' home. It depicted a healthy harvest and a clean river, something Collinson would like to see preserved for future generations.

"We're going to dedicate today's wade in to the memory of a dear friend who passed away on May 8, Dr. Kenneth Tenore," Fowler said at the wade-in Sunday.

Tenore, the former director of Chesapeake Biological Laboratory in Solomons, was instrumental in improving the facility, which studies the bay and its tributaries. He was also committed to Fowler's cause.

"We were very fortunate to have him," Fowler said.

Fowler has steadily enlisted a following of people who want to protect the river. Along with watermen and local residents, some politicians have attended the wade-ins — this was the 19th — religiously.

“Through mans’ actions over the years we have spoiled it,” Rep. Steny Hoyer (D-Md., 5th) said. “On behalf of all of us,” he thanked Fowler for his unscientific but “powerful political statement of the duty that we all have.”

Hoyer, who was whisked off to Atlanta for a fundraiser after his words about the river, was not able to wade in this year.

Other office seekers, including two democratic gubernatorial candidates, did wade out into the murky Patuxent Sunday.

“How do we make sure we’re not the generation that turns over a dead Chesapeake Bay to our grandchildren,” said Douglas M. Duncan, Montgomery County executive.

The gubernatorial candidate compared his own fight in Montgomery County against a power company that he said pumps out the equivalent amount of waste as every car in the county, a county with a population of 950,000. He said Fowler’s fight for the river is a great example of one man’s ability to change things that are important.

Baltimore Mayor Martin O’Malley, like Duncan, also pledged to get the bill passed if elected governor in November. Also a democratic contender for the governor’s office, O’Malley said that Marylanders expect the government to take action for certain things, including protecting its rivers and bays.

“Each of us does make a difference and our tomorrows can be better than our today’s,” O’Malley said.

“I am Bernie Fowler’s state representative,” Del. Sue Kullen (D-Calvert) said. “I’m the next generation of Calvert County that wants to clean up the Patuxent River.”

Kullen sponsored the bill, which actually did pass but was so diluted that it does nothing to help the Patuxent, she said. “The Bernie Fowler bill does nothing,” she said, calling it “disrespectful,” to the former senator and champion of the river.

Sen. Roy Dyson (D-Calvert, Charles, St. Mary’s) said he was dismayed “to see every agency of the state government that has something to do with the environment ... to come in and testify against it.”

Maryland Senate President Thomas V. Mike Miller Jr. (D-Calvert) also pledged to pass the bill next year, while taking a stab at the governor, who was noticeable absent from the wade-in.

“Two years ago we had the incumbent governor here and he made certain commitments he didn’t keep,” Miller said.

“It’s going to be a new government, a new general assembly and it’s going to happen,” he said.

Sherrod Sturrock, deputy director for education and special programs at the Calvert Marine Museum, said the museum is re-pledging its support of the river. The Drum Point Lighthouse, which now rests on the museum’s property, stood watch over the mouth of the Patuxent for generations. The museum has also hosted the Patuxent River Appreciation Days for nearly three decades.

“In recent years PRAD had lost its focus ... we are dedicated to revitalizing this event,” Sturrock said.

The Columbus Day weekend event will have more information about the river this year, including a state of the river submit on Friday afternoon to kick off the event.

“What we’re doing is putting the Patuxent River back into Patuxent River Appreciation Days,” she said.

After everyone got their feet wet, Chespax coordinator Tom Harten and youngsters released six terrapin turtles into the river. The animals were raised in Calvert County Public Schools classrooms as part of the Chespax program, which brings the environment into the classrooms and classrooms into the environment for hands on science lessons.